

A Footnote on the Pacific War

Paul F. Hooper

Intense debate has long persisted over a proper interpretation of the beginning of Japanese-American hostilities during World War II. Most authorities tend to view the clash as an almost inevitable finale to a series of increasingly unhappy developments in the relationship between the two nations dating from roughly the turn of the century. There is little in this interpretation suggesting that the conflict might have been avoided. At the same time, revisionist scholars have argued with considerable persuasion that there were indeed alternatives to war, but that the Roosevelt Administration, convinced that a war must be fought, chose to ignore them.¹ To date, no one has successfully resolved the issue.

Whether the holocaust which came to pass was in fact inevitable, documents recently made available show that a group of prominent civic and business leaders in pre-war Hawaii believed that it could be avoided and worked diligently if fruitlessly to prevent it.² The story of their efforts—replete with proposals reminiscent of Munich, allusions to treason and espionage; attempts to suppress embarrassing documents, and coincidences in timing too incredible for fiction—forms an interesting and tragi-comic, although probably irrelevant, footnote to the history of World War II in the Pacific.

The episode began in June 1940 when David L. Crawford, then President of the University of Hawaii and an activist in the Hawaii chapter of the Institute of Pacific Relations, wrote a brief memorandum proposing that the Institute marshal its influence behind an effort to bring Japan and the United States together in direct "peace pact" negotiations. Crawford argued that a meaningful pact might be negotiated and an otherwise inevitable war averted if each nation would agree to certain concessions and pledges.

The United States, Crawford felt, would have to recognize Manchukuo (Japan's puppet state in Manchuria), cooperate with Japan in the economic development of China, cease the construction of fortifications on Guam and in the Philippines, and remove the Pacific Fleet from Hawaiian waters. At the

Paul F. Hooper is an Assistant Professor of American Studies, University of Hawaii.

same time, Japan would have to agree to the withdrawal of troops from China proper and pledge to not invade the Philippines. In addition, he suggested that both nations would have to negotiate a mutually satisfactory commercial treaty and jointly pledge their disavowal of any plans to invade either the Netherland East Indies or any region of the British Commonwealth *except by joint action* (emphasis added).³ Unfortunately, he did not specify precisely what kind of joint action he had in mind.

It goes without saying that Crawford's list of necessary concessions, weighted in favor of Japan, was hardly calculated to find favor in Washington. Given the hostile state of Japanese-American relations at this time, the proposal seems naïve in its assumption that Washington might be willing to permit Japanese control over China and to leave Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines essentially defenseless. There is virtually nothing in the diplomatic record of this period suggesting that the United States would have even considered negotiating a settlement based upon such premises.⁴

Yet, shallow as it may seem, Crawford's proposal has to be taken with some degree of seriousness. In the first instance, the author was not a shallow man. Generally recognized as one of the University of Hawaii's more innovative leaders, he was neither uniformed on Asian-American relations nor given to vacuous propositions. Something (but what?) must have led him to believe that his proposal was firmly grounded.

Even more important in this regard is the fact that the Institute of Pacific Relations—the organization Crawford worked through—was at this point an influential force within the international arena. From its founding under YMCA auspices in Honolulu during the summer of 1925, the organization had grown to include an international governing body, national councils in eleven nations (Australia, Canada, China, France, Great Britain, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Soviet Union, and the United States), and numerous local chapters (such as the Hawaii group) within the various member nations. Among its participants and supporters, it counted prominent civic leaders and important policy makers from all but a few member nations. When it settled upon a course of action, it could anticipate serious hearings in London and Washington and lower-level consultation in the capitals of most of the other member nations. Hence, should Crawford's proposal have found its way into Institute channels, there is a reasonable chance that it would have gained the attention of some of the world's leading policy makers.

For better or worse, Crawford's proposal never reached such levels. Indeed, there is no evidence that it ever left the hands of the Hawaii group. Yet it remained very much alive and destined to follow a far stranger course than would likely have been the case had it entered regular Institute channels. For a year and a half following its original preparation, it received no recorded attention. It must, however, have been the subject of some discussion as it resurfaced late in 1941 in the form of still another proposal—in this instance, one prepared under the direction of businessman and former Hawaii chapter Chairman Frank E. Midkiff.

Midkiff's proposal, without address but obviously written with the Institute in mind, was only superficially different from its predecessor. Without specifically mentioning a "peace pact," Midkiff suggested that war might still be avoided if both Japan and the United States were willing to offer certain concessions in return for particular guarantees. As a first step, he suggested that Japan might be induced to withdraw from Indo-China in return for an American guarantee of oil supplies sufficient to meet "current" Japanese needs. Next, he speculated that the Japanese withdrawal might continue to the north bank of China's Yangtze River if the United States promised to supply Japan with enough steel and cotton to keep her industrial plants at "current" levels. Achievement of these objectives, he felt, might lead to a complete Japanese withdrawal from China (but not Manchuria) if the United States, China, Great Britain, and the Netherlands were willing to sign an "excellent" commercial treaty with Japan. Among other things, such a treaty would have to grant Japan preferred status as regards the exploitation of China's iron and coal reserves. At the same time, the United States would have to offer Japan a special loan of \$500,000,000, presumably as compensation for relinquished territories and resources. Rounding out the list of concessions and guarantees, Midkiff concluded that Japan could probably be convinced to break with the Axis powers in return for American, Chinese, British, and Soviet recognition of Manchukuo.⁵

Interesting as Midkiff's proposal itself may be, the course that it took in the days following its initial preparation is a matter of even greater fascination. Of special significance here is the manner in which the Hawaii group decided to advance the proposal and some of the personalities who eventually became involved in the effort. Rather than submit the document to the regular machinery of the Institute, the group chose to work solely (and secretly) with American government officials in an effort to establish direct contact with the White House. In this regard, the proposal contains a mysterious reference to encouragement and assistance from a "high ranking military official in the Territory of Hawaii" who, it is implied, would clear the document through to the President.⁶ Had this official been simply one of the numerous ranking military officials who frequently participated in the group's program of seminars and conferences, the reference might not warrant serious attention. This, however, is not the case. It is now known that Midkiff's reference was in fact to Lt. General Walter C. Short, then commander of Army forces in Hawaii and co-commander (with Rear Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, who commanded the Pacific fleet) of all military forces in Hawaii.⁷ He is, of course, also the man who would later be charged with much of the responsibility for the failure to prevent Japan's attack upon Pearl Harbor.

Spurred on by Short's behind-the-scenes assistance, the Hawaii group subjected Midkiff's proposal to a fast-paced examination in order that it might be forwarded to Washington at the earliest possible date. Their labors culminated at a Friday afternoon meeting in Midkiff's downtown Honolulu business office where the document was to be reviewed for the final time. Nine people—all of them leaders in the Institute's local chapter—were asked to

attend.⁸ Ironically, Midkiff himself was absent as he felt compelled to attend a meeting of the Honolulu Public Works Committee, and Riley H. Allen, a well-known Honolulu newspaper editor and the 1940-41 Chairman of the Hawaii chapter of the Institute, presided in his place.⁹ While there is no extant record of the meeting, Midkiff's note to Allen asking him to chair the meeting conveys the impression that the gathering was to be one of potentially historic proportions. In the first instance, it might provide a mechanism for halting the drift toward war in the Pacific. Equally important, it might also have the effect of hastening the demise of the Third Reich by making it possible for the Soviet Union to transfer thousands of troops from defensive positions in Siberia to the crucial European front.¹⁰ These are possibilities which must have excited even the calm businessmen who ran the Institute in Hawaii.

One can speculate that Midkiff's colleagues, finishing up their work late on that Friday afternoon, reckoned there was no need to rush the document to the telegraph office for transmission to Washington. As it was late afternoon, Hawaiian time, they knew the government offices had been closed for several hours and, with the weekend approaching, there was little likelihood that anyone would see the message before Monday. So, despite their intense efforts to finalize the proposal, they must have realized there was no particular urgency in forwarding it and, hence, postponed the task.¹¹

If all this were indeed the case, their judgment about the lack of urgency was correct, but for the wrong reason. It was already too late. By incredible coincidence, that particular Friday happened to be December 5, and Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's Pearl Harbor Striking Force was rapidly moving into attack position north of the Hawaiian chain. The "day of infamy" was at hand, and the Institute's proposal, whatever its wisdom or folly, no longer mattered. In the days following the Japanese attack, it was simply filed and forgotten by its sponsors who, to a man, responded to the call for war time solidarity and assistance. Their effort to halt the drift toward war a failure, they saw no option save support for the very event they had so recently sought to avoid.

It would have been better for all concerned had the episode ended on this tragic-comic note. Unhappily, it did not. Some years after the war, word of the Institute's peace-making attempt surfaced amidst charges that Midkiff and his associates had indirectly aided the enemy and had, in effect, been accessories to treason. Compounding the matter, Midkiff chose to attempt a cover-up of the charges rather than answer them directly.

This unpleasant after event developed in 1949 when Navy Captain Peyton Harrison—one of many military officers who participated in the Institute's pre-war program—charged in a "private and confidential" memorandum that the Hawaii group's entire peace-making effort had, in fact, been instigated by the "Jap War Lords."¹² Harrison, Naval Aide to Hawaii's Governor at the time he wrote the memorandum, claimed that he had harbored such suspicions throughout the war and that he had pursued a private investigation of the matter while in Japan as a member of the post-war occupation force. In the course of his investigation, Harrison wrote, he contacted a Mr. Kase who had

worked in the Japanese Foreign Office prior to the war and was responsible for all contacts with Nagao Kita, Japan's Consul General in Honolulu during the months prior to the attack upon Pearl Harbor. It is known that Kita did provide certain intelligence data on ship movements in Pearl Harbor, and Harrison stated that Kase offered proof that Kita was also responsible for acts of espionage involving General Short and the Institute. Specifically, Harrison said that Kase recalled sending Kita a directive ordering him to make indirect contact with the "Military Commander in Hawaii," suggesting that he promote a peace plan similar in detail to the one ultimately produced by Midkiff. Kase also recalled, Harrison noted, that Kita was to suggest that the actual proposal be issued under Institute auspices.¹³ In sum, Harrison's memorandum implied that the Institute was duped into serving Japan's purposes and that Short was virtually an enemy agent.

While there may be a surface plausibility to Harrison's charges, a lack of hard evidence renders them dubious. The key issue here concerns the relationship of Kita, Short, and Midkiff. There is no question but that the latter two did discuss the peace proposal at some length before it was finalized. Their conversation was no secret in Institute circles at the time and it is likely that even Harrison himself knew about it.¹⁴ None of this, however, establishes a treasonable link with Kita. The only proof here is Harrison's report on Kase's recollections, recollections which Harrison admits were encouraged by "plenty of good hot saki."¹⁵ Furthermore, Harrison demonstrates no knowledge whatsoever of the original Crawford proposal. Weighing the earlier origins of this document and the formative role it seems to have played in the preparation of Midkiff's subsequent proposal against Harrison's undocumented linkage of Short and Midkiff with Kita and the Japanese Foreign Office, it is difficult to take Harrison's charges seriously.¹⁶

Such a judgment appears to be supported both by the findings of the various governmental boards and committees which investigated the Pearl Harbor attack and by the research of various scholars who have studied the event. Although a large number of investigations were conducted, Harrison appeared at none of them to state his charges (while his memorandum was not issued until well after the last investigation was completed, the Congressional hearings on Pearl Harbor—the most important of all the various investigations—were under way at the very time he interviewed Kase), and no hearing found evidence of treasonable activity on the part of any individual or organization. Nor has any serious scholar found evidence of such activity. Harrison's charges, in other words, go both unmentioned and unsupported in the documentation and literature surrounding the Pearl Harbor issue.¹⁷ Indeed, it is worth noting that no mention of any aspect of the Institute's peace-making effort can be found in the documentation or literature on Pearl Harbor.¹⁸

Whatever the shortcomings of these charges, the fact remains that Midkiff found them unsettling enough to attempt a half-hearted cover-up of Harrison's original memorandum. Late in 1949, he wrote instructions on the margin of the Institute's copy of the document to the effect that it should be filed away

and never again be made available. He did not, as he put it, want to "reopen this old wound."¹⁹

With this act, the entire episode—by now a thoroughly unhappy one—ground to a halt. It was, at least so far as the participants were concerned, simply one more item for history's dust bin. Perhaps this is where it does belong. It involved events which might have had some bearing upon the course of history but ultimately did not. As such, it ranks as no more than an inconsequential footnote which may be of passing interest to Hawaiian and Pacific historians.

There are, however, other perspectives upon this episode which cast it in a different light. Its lack of either hero or villain illustrates with painful clarity the oft-repeated proposition that good and evil, insight and myopia, so often exist side by side in the same person. Histories on a grander scale too often sweep over this point. More concretely, this episode is also an illustration—one in a series extending back in time to the Western discovery of the Islands and forward to the present—of Hawaii's persistent hope of playing a larger-than-life role in the affairs of the Pacific Basin. Through periods of monarchy, independence, territorial status, and statehood, no aspect of Hawaiian history has been more constant than the urge to influence Pacific history. Styles and tactics have changed over the years—as a comparison of Kalakaua's comic opera imperialism, the Institute's idealistic internationalism, and the contemporary interest in a transcultural Pacific community well demonstrates—but the urge itself has not.²⁰ Hence, the story of the Institute's peace-making effort does illustrate a major characteristic of the Hawaiian (and, to a lesser extent, Pacific) past and probably foretells something of the future. Viewed in such fashion, it is a story which may in fact be of more than just passing interest.

NOTES

¹ A useful if somewhat dated biographical review of this debate is presented in Louis Morton, "Pearl Harbor in Perspective: A Bibliographical Review," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, 81 (April 1955), 460-68. A more recent work which must also be consulted in Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

² Reference here is to the recently cataloged materials on the Institute of Pacific Relations contained in the Archives of the University of Hawaii.

³ D. L. Crawford Memorandum, June 1940, Institute of Pacific Relations Document Collection, Honolulu Branch, Box 7. (Archives, University of Hawaii), hereafter IPR.

⁴ "Absurd" would be an even better word considering the behind-the-scenes planning for a Pacific war which the United States and Great Britain were conducting at this time. However, most if not all of this activity was secret and Crawford surely knew nothing of it.

⁵ Frank E. Midkiff Memorandum, December 4, 1941, IPR, Box 7.

⁶ *Ibid.* Interestingly enough, this official was willing to consult confidentially with the group, but insisted that he not be associated with the proposal.

- ⁷ Personal interview with Frank E. Midkiff, January 29, 1973.
- ⁸ They were Riley H. Allen, Robbins B. Anderson, Frank C. Atherton, A. L. Dean, Walter F. Dillingham, Gerald W. Fisher, Philip S. Platt, Oscar F. Shepard, and Hugh C. Tennent. See Charles Loomis, Secretary, IPR, to Allen, December 5, 1941, IPR, Box 7.
- ⁹ Midkiff to Allen, December 5, 1941, IPR, Box 7.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ There is no indication whatsoever that the proposal was ever forwarded to Washington.
- ¹² Peyton Harrison Memorandum, March 25, 1949, IPR, Box 7. The memorandum has no addressee and there is no apparent way of determining who received copies, save the Institute which received at least one copy which it placed in its files.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Indeed, Harrison claims to have been one of the participants in the December meetings. He may have been involved in some of them and he may have discussed still others, but he was not invited to the final meeting on December 5. See Loomis to Allen, *op. cit.* In fact, either he did not even know of this meeting or he mistook the date as he states that the final, crucial meeting occurred on December 4. See Harrison, Memorandum.
- ¹⁵ Harrison, Memorandum.
- ¹⁶ This paper assumes that there is a connection between the two proposals. It should be noted, however, that the evidence in support of this assumption is circumstantial—the similarity of the proposals and the close relationship of the men involved—rather than direct.
- ¹⁷ There is a possibility that Harrison himself did not take his charges that seriously as his basic purpose in making them, admitted quite frankly in his memorandum, was not so much to explore the past as to warn the nation, then entering into the Cold War with the Soviet Union, of the dangers of foreign infiltration and espionage. See Harrison, Memorandum.
- ¹⁸ In particular, see U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, *Hearings*, 79th Cong., 1st Sess., 1945–46. Nowhere in the forty volumes of this collection is there mention of either Harrison's charges or the Institute's proposals. The latter omission is especially interesting as testimony by both Midkiff and Allen is part of the record. Apparently the only record of this episode is that contained in the Institute's own documents.
- ¹⁹ Harrison, Memorandum. This hope came near realization. Had the Institute's own documents been lost, there would, as the preceding note suggests, be no record of the episode.
- ²⁰ The full record of this internationalist urge—which, interestingly enough, includes a remarkably similar effort by the Pan-Pacific Union, another Hawaii-based internationalist group, to make peace between Japan and America—is the subject of a forthcoming book by the author of this article.